A. Dickson G-5 (1929-47) 1951 Mi 1 Kuwait
Reference 1424

CHAPTER X

Children

BIRTH

942 Every Arab woman's greatest desire in life is to have a child. She is brought up with this idea from childhood. The natural desire to become a mother is reinforced by the reproach attached to childlessness and by a woman's knowledge that she will be divorced if she does not produce a son and heir for her husband.

942 791 If she does not conceive soon after marriage, she often resorts to various herb concoctions made from the grasses of the field, and drinks these: frequently with ill result. The "wise" old women of every tribe are adepts in compounding draughts to stimulate fertility and also in preparing of "love philtres", for those who need them. They also claim to be able to interpret dreams. Most old women go in for this form of helping their younger sisters.

798 Fortune-telling is not uncommonly also practised by these old crones, though in Wahhabi land it is considered sinful and is not openly pursued.

949 The average girl's strength at the birth of her first and subsequent children is quite phenomenal. I knew of a Mutairi girl, for instance, who came into hospital at Kuwait one evening to have her baby. The child was born at 2 a.m. and two hours later the girl wrapped up her child, slung it over her back, and in the momentary absence of the lady doctor, departed on foot to her people camped twenty miles away.

Among the shepherd tribes of Iraq women produce children while the tribe is on the march. Migration, of course, cannot stop. The woman drops behind, has her baby, at times with only one woman to assist her, and after washing it herself in clean sand, picks it up and follows the tribe. She knows she will be left behind, perhaps to die, unless she keeps up with the others. The recognised birth congratulation formula is *mubarakin fi kul maulud al Sal'ak*.

L. Dickson G-5 (1939-47) 1951 142 I. Kuwait
Reference 1474

Birth of a Baby

Chap. X

A man cohabits with his wife until close on the birth of their child. He stays
As soon as the baby is born, however, the mother becomes "unclean" (*nafsa* or *nafsi*) and the husband cannot go near her for forty days. This rule is carefully observed among all classes.

After a child is born, a very common method of treating the womb is to pack it with common salt. This is a very painful operation, and results in great suffering later, for a thickening of certain tissues supervenes, with disastrous consequences. The Mission hospital authorities in Kuwait and Bahrein are never tired of preaching the evil of the practice, but with little result.

After the birth of a child Bedawin women, and more especially Arab townswomen, resort to various drugs, etc., to reduce the size of the vagina to normal, or less than normal. This "pleases the husband", they say. Alum is the basic principal of the drugs employed. Zahwa, Shammari wife of 'Abdullah bin Mut'ai of the Alshe,* told me this in April 1931 on one of my wife's and my many visits.

Many women, having had two or three children, dread to have more, and my wife has frequently been asked both in the town and in the desert of Kuwait how they can prevent further conception. It is universally believed among them that European women know many methods of contraception, but are unwilling to divulge their secrets. Among Bedawin generally, if a woman has difficulty in bearing her child, a mare is brought in to her apartment or the portion of tent set apart for her; barley is then placed in her lap, and the mare is induced to eat. If the animal whinnies and eats, all is well, two or three rifle shots are fired at the same time, and the woman is then given strength to bring forth.

It sometimes happens that immediately after birth the mother becomes what the Bedawin call *mukhbil* (mute), and unable to speak.† This is considered a very dangerous state, and according to them will result in death unless she can be induced to speak. In such circumstances also, a mare is hastily sent for and brought to the woman's side and offered barley from her lap. If the mare eats, the woman's tongue is loosed and her senses returns. If not, according to the common belief, the woman is sure to die.

On 20th February, 1933, in Kuwait, my own mare was borrowed

* Shammar tribe.

† This epithet is probably a form of hysteria.

L. Dickson G-6 (1933-47) 1951 MI I Kuwait
Reference 1424

for the purpose. The mother lived, and her father personally thanked me for lending the mare and saving his daughter. In the absence of my mare a similar request for the loan of my horse was made (15th August, 1933). Unfortunately in this case the patient died.

The rights of a Bedawin father over his children are absolute; the mother has practically no rights. Should a man divorce his wife, the sons usually go with the father and the girls with the mother. Should the children be infants, the mother keeps them until they can fend for themselves, and then the father comes and takes them away. (The age in the case of boys is eight.) This removal of a son by his father is the cause of much heartrending grief at times, but is universally practised.

The children thus taken away from their mother live with their father and are brought up by their stepmother. They have the right of visiting their own mother's tent at stated intervals, usually once a week. In a tribe camped together the hardship is not great, but when a man has married a woman from another tribe, the rule causes much unhappiness, as the woman usually goes back to her people, who may be several hundreds of miles away: and she rarely sees her children again.

Among the Al Sa'ud, Al Subah, etc., it is a common custom to have as wives two or three Bedawin lasses at a time, who always remain camped with their own people. When a child is born to one of these desert-dwelling wives it is usually taken right away and brought up in the shaikh's household in Kuwait or Riyadh. It is not considered fitting that the offspring of one of the ruling family, even if the mother is of noble tribal birth, should be left to grow up in tribal surroundings. This feeling is particularly strong if the child is a boy.* As a matter of fact, in such alliances the wife is early divorced and pensioned off with a handsome present. This marrying of tribal girls in addition to the "Queen", who is always a lady of the ruling family, is a normal and accepted practice among the ruling classes in Arabia. It is a method of showing honour to a tribe, and brings useful alliances in its train. Tribal shaikhs, on the other hand, usually content themselves with one wife.

* This does not run counter to the age-long custom among the nobility of Arabia of sending their sons into the desert to be brought up by the Bedawin in order that they may acquire hardihood.

L Dickson G-6 (1939-47) 1951 MI I Kuwait MI1
Bedouins 1434

Averting Evil Eye

Chap. X

Rulers' shaikhs, on the other hand, usually content themselves with one wife. In Kuwait, for instance, the ruler's Queen is a lady of the Al Sa'ūd. She is never divorced—such a thing would be a disgrace to the family as a whole. She remains the Shaikhah always. She magnanimously, however, allows the Shaikh Ibn Subah to take three other tribal wives, to amuse himself with, and to change them as often as he likes, provided he does not bring them into the town of Kuwait itself. They must remain in the desert. In this way her pride is satisfied. She remains the Queen. Here is an object lesson to the West.

K 643 587

At the birth of a child to a Badawin mother, a dagger, piece of steel, or even a needle or bodkin, must be placed in the cot or attached to the clothes of the baby. The mother cannot move the child without this piece of metal going with it. Iron or steel, is the thing that counts. Gold, etc., will not do. The idea is that it wards off the Evil Eye. The custom is universal among the Murair, D'hafir, Shammar, 'Ajman and 'Awazim tribes, and probably will be found to exist among all the desert tribes.

B 844 753

A woman is said to be *Admila* or *Aadla* when she is pregnant. She is said to have *walādat* or *shimā'at* when the child is born. The term *shimo* is always used for the unborn child.

B 843

CIRCUMCISION

Among the Badawin circumcision is performed when the boy is between three and a half and seven years.

C 304 852

The operation is usually done by one who has had previous practice. The day is looked upon as a family holiday, and according to a man's means, guests and neighbours are invited to a meal, best clothes are donned, and the womenfolk dance among themselves till a late hour, except the mother, who runs away (*tishaut*) and hides herself. The boy is now a "proper Muslim".

The season for the circumcision ceremony is nearly always June (*al Sifāri*) when the *Aāwā* or dry north-west wind is blowing. The wound is supposed to heal quickly then. If the sea is near by, the boy is encouraged to bathe, the salty nature of the water acting as an antiseptic.

Among some Badawin the feasting of guests and neighbours goes on for the number of days that the boy has years, i.e. if he is six years